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ABSTRACT

This document is a fact sheet on missing children data collected by the National Crime Information Center (NCIC). The document contains details on the design of the NCIC system, state control for management and use of the system, access to the system, criteria for missing persons, number of active cases, and the unidentified persons file of the NCIC. The requirements of the Missing Children's Assistance Act of 1984 to be implemented by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention are described. A table gives data on whether individual states have state laws requiring entry into the NCIC, if there is a timeframe for entry, and what the timeframe is for each state. (ABL)

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United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Fact Sheet for the
Honorable Alfonse M. D'Amato,
United States Senate

January 1986

MISSING CHILDREN

Missing Children Data Collected by the National Crime Information Center

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United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

B-202245

January 28, 1986

The Honorable Alfonse M. D'Amato
United States Senate

Dear Senator D'Amato:

Your October 7, 1985, letter requested that we examine and analyze several questions that had been raised during congressional discussions concerning missing children. These questions included such issues as the number of missing children, the impact that different state laws have on locating missing children, and the effectiveness of the methods used to locate missing children.

On October 23, 1985, we met with a representative of your office and agreed that the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) planned study to develop accurate information on the extent and nature of the missing children problem would answer the questions raised in your request letter. However, we agreed to provide you with information on the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), an on-line automated data base system managed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. NCIC provides federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies with computer access to documented information that is stored in 12 files. The files include such categories as wanted persons, missing persons, stolen vehicles, and unidentified persons. Specifically, we agreed to provide you with information on (1) what mechanisms are being used to report data on missing children to NCIC, (2) which categories of missing children are listed in the system's data base, and (3) which states are reporting data on missing children to NCIC.

Currently, all states enter data on missing persons into NCIC, and 30 states require that their law enforcement agencies do so. Remote terminals located throughout the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Canada are used to report data to the system's central computer. The system's missing persons and unidentified persons files contain information on missing children. Additional details on NCIC's and OJJDP's efforts concerning missing children are provided in appendixes I and II.

The information presented in the appendixes was provided to us by Department of Justice officials and by a representative of the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children. We did not independently verify the information.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce the contents of this document earlier, we plan no further distribution until 5 days from the date of this letter. At that time, we will send it to interested parties and make copies available to others upon request. If there are any questions regarding the contents of this document, please call Mr. John Anderson on (202) 272-6353.

Sincerely yours,

Arnold P. Jones
Senior Associate Director

DATA CONCERNING MISSING CHILDREN

THE NATIONAL CRIME INFORMATION CENTER

--Currently, NCIC is designed to be a fast and responsive operating system to assist policemen on the streets. There are about 30,000 terminals throughout the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Canada which provide access to the NCIC files.

--Each state has a terminal control agency that is responsible for managing and funding the NCIC system at the state level. In addition, an NCIC Advisory Policy Board meets twice a year to consider user recommendations for improving the system.

--NCIC can be accessed through mobile terminals that can be mounted in police cars or through stationary terminals in police or law enforcement agency facilities. Missing children reports can be either entered into or deleted from the data base by the local agency in the jurisdiction from which the child is missing or by the FBI. In order to make an entry or an inquiry, the terminal operator must furnish the computer with a standardized, coded description of what the operator wants and with an NCIC-assigned code that identifies the agency.

--The two NCIC files of particular interest to investigators of missing children cases are the missing persons file and the unidentified persons file.

--The missing persons file was created in 1975 and contains information on individuals meeting the following criteria:

- DISABILITY: A person of any age who is missing and who has a proven physical or mental disability--thereby subjecting himself, herself, or others to personal and immediate danger.
- ENDANGERED: A person of any age who is missing and in the company of another person under circumstances indicating that his/her physical safety is in danger.
- INVOLUNTARY: A person of any age who is missing under circumstances indicating that the disappearance was not voluntary--i.e., abduction or kidnapping.
- JUVENILE: A person who is missing and declared unemancipated as defined by the laws of his or her state of residence and who does not meet any of the other criteria for inclusion in the missing persons file.
- CATASTROPHE: A person of any age who is missing after a catastrophe.

--According to the NCIC Section Chief, the juvenile category of the missing persons file does not describe the reason for the juvenile being missing, e.g., runaway.

--On November 1, 1985, NCIC had 49,053 active cases in the missing persons file, 36,454 of which were in the juvenile category. Although the NCIC statistics did not show how many juveniles were included in the file's other categories, the Section Chief estimated that approximately 90 percent of the cases in the missing persons file were juveniles.

--The Missing Children Act of 1982 (Public Law 97-292), dated October 12, 1982, authorized the creation of the unidentified persons file which became operational in 1983. It includes information on unidentified bodies or parts of bodies that have been found or on individuals who cannot identify themselves due to handicap, amnesia, or age. Each day, the unidentified persons file is compared with the missing persons file for possible matches. On November 1, 1985, there were 1,158 entries in the unidentified persons file, and according to the Section Chief, "very few" of them were juveniles. The Section Chief told us that in the 2 years the file has been operational there have been 2 positive identifications.

--According to an NCIC survey of all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands that was presented at the December 4-5, 1985, NCIC Advisory Policy Board meeting:

- Twenty-eight states indicated that their users are required by law to enter a record in NCIC when they receive a missing person report, and two states indicated that entry is required by rules, regulations, or directives. Twenty-eight of the 30 states indicated that the entry must be made within a specified timeframe following receipt of a missing person report. (See app. II.)

- Criminal justice agencies in 49 states and the District of Columbia have access to the unidentified persons file. Indiana and Puerto Rico do not provide access to their users.

--Some have suggested that the NCIC system develop a more complete statistical capability. The FBI and the NCIC Advisory Policy Board do not support such a change. The FBI's Section Chief for NCIC told us that NCIC is not meant to be a statistical system and that the FBI's Uniform Crime Report Program was designed to collect comprehensive statistical data. He told us that the Uniform Crime Report Program is currently undergoing a major overhaul that would enable the program to collect more comprehensive information and statistics about criminal incidents, including missing

children. Essentially, the program will require detailed individual records for each reported incident instead of the summary statistics that are currently required. The Section Chief told us that with the expansion of the program there will be more complete statistics for examining such things as parental kidnappings or missing children. Currently, the reporting system does not allow this to be done.

THE OFFICE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION

--The Missing Children's Assistance Act of 1984 (Public Law 98-473), dated October 12, 1984, requires that the Administrator, OJJDP, establish and operate a national resource center and clearinghouse to

- provide state and local governments, public and private nonprofit agencies, and individuals with technical assistance in locating and recovering missing children;
- coordinate public and private programs which locate, recover, and reunite missing children with their legal custodian;
- disseminate information about missing children programs; and
- provide technical assistance to law enforcement agencies and others in prevention, investigation, prosecution, and treatment of the missing and exploited children cases.

--The act also requires OJJDP to periodically conduct "national incident studies" to determine, for a given year, the actual number of children reported missing each year, the number of children who are victims of abductions by strangers and of parental kidnappings, and the number who are recovered.

--The OJJDP, through the Advisory Board on Missing Children, is developing a plan for the first national incident study. A number of pilot tests have been conducted to assist the Board in determining the most appropriate methodology for collecting the necessary data.

--A national study of law enforcement agencies' policies and practices regarding missing children and homeless youth is also scheduled to start in early spring 1986. The study is supposed to describe the role of law enforcement agencies in responding to reports of missing children, focusing on how local law enforcement agencies utilize state and federal resources such as NCIC.

--The OJJDP also funds the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children to provide a national resource and

technical center to assist state law enforcement agencies in investigating and prosecuting cases of missing and exploited children. The Center has conducted such activities as providing legislative packages to state legislators that are interested in addressing child protection issues, conducting a nationwide toll-free hotline, and conducting a media campaign to locate and recover missing children through posters and milk carton displays.

--The Center maintains its own data base on missing children. The children listed in this system have been reported to the Center by parents, schools, law enforcement agencies, etc. The Center has three categories of missing children in its system: kidnapped by non-family, kidnapped by parent, and runaways.

--As of October 1984, the data base contained the following:

- 217 active non-family kidnappings with 60 additional children recovered,[1]
- 2,000 parental kidnappings with 400 additional children recovered,[2] and
- 3,000 runaways.

[1]An official of the Center estimated that more than 40 of the 60 recovered children were alive when recovered.

[2]Additional recovered include those found dead.

TABLE II.1: STATES REQUIRING MISSING PERSON ENTRY INTO THE NATIONAL CRIME INFORMATION CENTER[a]

State	Is there a state law mandating NCIC entry?	Is there a timeframe for missing person record entry?	Timeframe
Alabama	Yes	Yes	72 hours
Alaska	Yes	Yes	24 hours
Arkansas	Yes	No	-
California	Yes	Yes	Within 4 hours if the person is under 12 years of age
Colorado	Yes	Yes	Within 24 hours for missing children
Florida	Yes	Yes	Immediately
Georgia	Yes	Yes	Immediately for juveniles, no timeframe for others
Illinois	Yes	Yes	As soon as minimum data are available
Indiana	Yes	Yes	Daily basis
Iowa	Yes	Yes	Immediately for juveniles
Kansas	No	Yes	Immediately per Kansas Bureau of Investigation rules and regulations
Kentucky	Yes	Yes	Immediately
Maine	Yes	Yes	Within 48 hours for certain juveniles
Maryland	Yes	Yes	For children, immediately or within 12 hours depending on circumstances
Massachusetts	Yes	Yes	Immediately for persons under 18 years of age
Minnesota	Yes	No	-
Missouri	Yes	Yes	As soon as possible
Montana	Yes	Yes	Immediately
Nebraska	Yes	Yes	Immediately for juveniles
Nevada	Yes	Yes	Juveniles only within 36 hours
New Hampshire	Yes	Yes	12 hours
New Jersey	No	Yes	Immediately per attorney general's directive (no state law)
New York	Yes	Yes	48 hours for children
Ohio	Yes	Yes	Within 12 hours of making report for missing juveniles
Oklahoma	Yes	Yes	Within 3 days
Oregon	Yes	Yes	48 hours
Pennsylvania	Yes	Yes	Immediately
Texas	Yes	Yes	Immediately
Virginia	Yes	Yes	Immediately upon receiving missing child report
Washington	Yes	Yes	Within 12 hours for missing children

Source: FBI's NCIC

[a]Presented at NCIC Advisory Board's December 4-5, 1985 meeting.

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